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US drug agents stand firm against personal threats by traffickers

Support from American public and teamwork abroad bolster agents

By Warren Richey

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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In recent months, life has become a little easier for the foot soldiers of the Reagan administration's war on drugs.

Nonetheless, US Drug Enforcement Administration agents continue to take special precautions six months after the killing of a DEA agent in Mexico and receipt of reports that Colombian drug traffickers were offering "bounties" for the kidnapping of individual DEA agents.

Rather than intimidating the roughly 2,700 DEA agents in the United States, the killing and threats have worked as a catalyst, officials say, bolstering DEA resolve to battle international narcotics traffickers. They have even helped rally US public support behind the often anonymous agents and their mission.

"I think the traffickers realize that we were not intimidated by the threats and that it would be a foolhardy thing to [carry out the threats]," says Billy Yout, a DEA spokesman in Miami. "I think they also realize that if they did attempt to pull it off, they would meet fierce resistance."

Spurred by intelligence reports early this year that powerful Colombian drug traffickers were launching an all-out counteroffensive in the war on drugs (including a reported \$350,000 "contract" for the kidnapping of the DEA administrator), the DEA shifted some \$2.8 million of its money to beef up security. The effort included the establishment of a central monitoring system through which threats to DEA agents are analyzed.

In addition, DEA agents made full use of undercover and street sources to further assess the credibility of threats received and to head off any actions that might threaten a federal agent.

Law enforcement officials consider the Colombian threats unprecedented. "Even the traditional organized crime figures to my knowledge had never tried to directly attack or go after federal agents," says Mr. Yout.

At one point, press reports speculated that Colombian "hit squads" had infiltrated the US. Nonetheless, no hit-squad members have been arrested, and even the kidnapping threats have subsided, officials say.

"It is much quieter at this time," says DEA spokesman Bill Deac in Washington.

DEA officials believe that by showing they wouldn't back down in the face of repeated threats, they have sent a loud, clear message to narcotics traffickers.

That message has been conveyed in part, officials say, by the intensity of the joint DEA-Mexican investigation into the kidnapping and murder of special DEA agent Enrique Camarena in Mexico last February.

Mexican authorities have arrested 53 persons, including Rafael Caro Quintero and Enrique Fronseca. Law enforcement officials believe both men are major figures in marijuana and cocaine trafficking in Mexico. Several

low-level Mexican law enforcement officials have also been arrested for corruption in the Camarena investigation.

While it is not linked to the Colombian kidnapping threats, US law enforcement officials see the Camarena murder as an example of the increasingly arrogant and ruthless nature of international drug traffickers.

US officials are intent on making sure that those responsible for the murder of Camarena are brought to justice. This high priority strained relations between the US and Mexico when earlier this year US officials accused the Mexicans of dragging their feet in the investigation.

Since then, Attorney General Edwin Meese III has met twice with his Mexican counterpart concerning the Camarena investigation, most recently two weeks ago in Mexico City. After that meeting, a US Justice Department spokesman said, "The attorney general was pleased with the reports he got from the Mexican attorney general."

The spokesman added that Justice Department officials "will continue to monitor" the Mexican investigation.

In the meantime, DEA agents in San Diego have established a memorial fund to help Mrs. Camarena and her three children. Agents in San Diego held a raffle and raised \$58,000. In Miami, a benefit golf tournament netted \$6,600. Other contributions came in from DEA agents around the world. The fund now totals more than \$70,000 and is slated to help pay education costs for Camarena's three children.